

Remarks on the Situations in Ukraine and Gaza

July 21, 2014

Good morning, everybody. I wanted to make a brief statement about the tragedy in Ukraine. Before I do, though, I want to note that Secretary Kerry has departed for the Middle East. As I've said many times, Israel has a right to defend itself against rocket and tunnel attacks from Hamas. And as a result of its operations, Israel has already done significant damage to Hamas's terrorist infrastructure in Gaza. I've also said, however, that we have serious concerns about the rising number of Palestinian civilian deaths and the loss of Israeli lives. And that is why it now has to be our focus and the focus of the international community to bring about a cease-fire that ends the fighting and that can stop the deaths of innocent civilians, both in Gaza and in Israel.

So Secretary Kerry will meet with allies and partners. I've instructed him to push for an immediate cessation of hostilities based on a return to the November 2012 cease-fire agreement between Israel and Hamas in Gaza. The work will not be easy. Obviously, there are enormous passions involved in this and some very difficult strategic issues involved. Nevertheless, I've asked John to do everything he can to help facilitate a cessation to hostilities. We don't want to see any more civilians getting killed.

With respect to Ukraine, it's now been 4 days since Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 was shot down over territory controlled by Russian-backed separatists in Ukraine. Over the last several days, our hearts have been absolutely broken as we've learned more about the extraordinary and beautiful lives that were lost: men, women, and children and infants who were killed so suddenly and so senselessly.

Our thoughts and prayers continue to be with their families around the world who are going through just unimaginable grief. I've had the opportunity to speak to a number of leaders around the world whose citizens were lost on this flight, and all of them remain in a state of shock, but frankly, also in a state of outrage.

Our immediate focus is on recovering those who were lost, investigating exactly what happened, and putting forward the facts. We have to make sure that the truth is out and that accountability exists.

Now, international investigators are on the ground. They have been organized. I've sent teams; other countries have sent teams. They are prepared, they are organized, to conduct what should be the kinds of protocols and scouring and collecting of evidence that should follow any international incident like this. And what they need right now is immediate and full access to the crash site. They need to be able to conduct a prompt and full and unimpeded as well as transparent investigation. And recovery personnel have to do the solemn and sacred work of recovering the remains of those who were lost.

Now, Ukrainian President Poroshenko has declared a demilitarized zone around the crash site. As I said before, you have international teams already in place prepared to conduct the investigation and recover the remains of those who have been lost. But unfortunately, the Russian-backed separatists who control the area continue to block the investigation. They have repeatedly prevented international investigators from gaining full access to the wreckage. As investigators approached, they fired their weapons into the air. These separatists are removing

evidence from the crash site, all of which begs the question, what exactly are they trying to hide?

Moreover, these Russian-backed separatists are removing bodies from the crash site, oftentimes without the care that we would normally expect from a tragedy like this. And this is an insult to those who have lost loved ones. This is the kind of behavior that has no place in the community of nations.

Now, Russia has extraordinary influence over these separatists. No one denies that. Russia has urged them on. Russia has trained them. We know that Russia has armed them with military equipment and weapons, including antiaircraft weapons. Key separatist leaders are Russian citizens. So given its direct influence over the separatists, Russia and President Putin, in particular, has direct responsibility to compel them to cooperate with the investigation. That is the least that they can do.

President Putin says that he supports a full and fair investigation. And I appreciate those words, but they have to be supported by actions. The burden now is on Russia to insist that the separatists stop tampering with the evidence, grant investigators who are already on the ground immediate, full, and unimpeded access to the crash site. The separatists and the Russian sponsors are responsible for the safety of the investigators doing their work. And along with our allies and partners, we will be working this issue at the United Nations today.

More broadly, as I've said throughout this crisis and the crisis in Ukraine generally—and I've said this directly to President Putin as well as publicly—my preference continues to be finding a diplomatic resolution within Ukraine. I believe that can still happen. That is my preference today, and it will continue to be my preference.

But if Russia continues to violate Ukraine's sovereignty and to back these separatists and these separatists become more and more dangerous and now are risks not simply to the people inside of Ukraine, but the broader international community, then Russia will only further isolate itself from the international community, and the costs for Russia's behavior will only continue to increase.

Now is the time for President Putin and Russia to pivot away from the strategy that they've been taking and get serious about trying to resolve hostilities within Ukraine in a way that respects Ukraine's sovereignty and respects the right of the Ukrainian people to make their own decisions about their own lives.

And time is of the essence. Our friends and allies need to be able to recover those who were lost. That's the least we can do. That's the least that decency demands. Families deserve to be able to lay their loved ones to rest with dignity. The world deserves to know exactly what happened. And the people of Ukraine deserve to determine their own future.

Thanks.

NOTE: The President spoke at 11:16 a.m. on the South Lawn at the White House.

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